

# ***Fairness: To each according to his needs***

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"How come he gets three and I only get two?"

"You gave Bob a hunting knife when he was thirteen ..."

"C'mon, Mom. That's not fair!"

Similar phrases are repeated time and again in households as parents attempt to handle their children in a fair and equitable fashion. The juggling of "fairness" and "equality" presents a never-ending conundrum for parents, and few of us realize that these concepts are not synonymous ...in fact, they are often total opposites. The classic work in moral development conducted by Laurence Kohlberg at Harvard University indicates that children, in their initial stages of moral development, define "fairness" thusly:

"Fairness means that everyone gets the same."

Unfortunately, in many households children have convinced their parents that the above definition is a true and accurate one. Consider: How many fathers would return from a business trip bearing a gift for only one child? How often do you resist the temptation to purchase a special gift for one child because you would feel the wrath of the siblings who received nothing? At holiday time do you carefully compute and monitor each child's gift list to ensure that all receive the identical number of gifts? If this sounds familiar, you should understand that you are applying the concept of "fairness" at the level of a 7- or 8-year-old child.

In actuality, the definition of fairness has little to do with treating people in an identical manner. The true definition of fairness is:

"Fairness means that everyone gets what he or she needs."

Consider the following analogy: The readership of the Quarterboard is 5,000 families. Suppose a magnanimous philanthropist were to give us a grant of \$5 million and asked that the funds be distributed equally to the readership. Each family would receive a check for \$1,000. That's easy. However, if he were to request that the funds be divided fairly among the readership, that would require a far more complex and diverse distribution. We would be bound to consider the financial needs of each member's family. Suppose one family had a chronically ill child and limited financial resources were postponing much-needed therapy for the youngster. Fairness would dictate that the family would receive a disproportionate amount of the donated funds. Fairness and equality are not synonymous.

What impact does all of this have upon parenting? Parents must realize that, in order to be fair to their children, each must be treated differently. We must recognize their unique patterns of strengths and needs. In the life of a family, there will be times when the needs of one family member become paramount. In order to be fair, the parent must react to those needs by investing a disproportionate amount of time, energy, and resources in that child. Parents should not become guilt-ridden about the situation but allot their energies based upon the children's needs. Parents should feel secure in the fact that their "offended" sibling will, at some time in the future, also require some extra effort to meet their unique needs.

In order for this "fairness doctrine" to work effectively, the parent must also understand the difference between "need" and "want." Stephen Glenn, noted author and parenting expert, helps us understand this

delineation in the following dialogue between a mother and her 14-year-old daughter:

*Daughter:* "Mom, I need a pair of stone-washed "Guess How" designer jeans. I need \$55."

*Mom:* "Nope. I have checked your closet and I agree that you need a pair of jeans. However, you want a pair of designer jeans. I will gladly provide you with what you need. Please accept this check for \$35 which will buy you the jeans that you need. If you want the designer jeans badly enough, I am sure that you will find some way to add \$20 to my \$35."

In summary, parents who go to great lengths to see that they give each of their children the identical amount of energy, time, and resources are probably being unfair to all of them. Let us celebrate the unique needs, goals, and personalities of each of our children.

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